

Russell Kirk

Computer Fears? Build 'Right To Print-Out'

During the past year, many of the people involved in the computer business have been worrying about the menace to privacy and freedom which is presented by centralized banks of computerized information.

If the proposed National Data Bank takes on reality, will every citizen of these United States be in danger of harassment, meddling--and possibly worse--by agencies of government and others who have access to such data?

Some months ago, the editor of *Computers and Automation*, a journal of that trade, actually proposed to throw a wrench into the machinery, unless measures are taken to protect the privacy of people about whom data has been gathered. "As a last resort," he wrote, "we should remember that large files are very vulnerable to error." And, as this gentleman (Edmund C. Berkeley) went on, computers can be induced to err:

"It would be highly desirable for everyone engaged in an unpopular activity to adopt three names and three Social Security numbers. This ought to throw any data system, computerized or not, into convulsions. Furthermore, if one adopted a new name and a new Social Security number every four months or so, I believe the convulsions in the data system would never die down--oscillation would continue indefinitely."

Incidentally, it is quite lawful for anyone to have several Social Security numbers; also, for many purposes, there is nothing illicit about using a pseudonym. How the data banks would cope with a widespread rebellion, only the god of the computers knows.

Mr. Berkeley proposes, however, that before resorting to such tactics, the friends of privacy should seek the passage of laws restricting the use of data files in some ways and opening those files in other ways. He would like to see the

following rights for anyone whose name has got into a data bank:

The right to read what is maintained in any file kept about you by the FBI, or the CIA, or any credit bureau, or any other agency which compiles information about you.

The right to inform the agency of errors.

The right to compel the changing of untrue information about you.

The right to compel the removal of irrelevant information about you.

Although I sympathize generally with these claims, I cannot go all the way with Mr. Berkeley. It would be all very well, for instance, for an innocent person to have access to information about himself in the files of police agencies. But not everybody is innocent.

If a criminal were permitted access to such files about himself, not only might detection and prosecution of his activities become almost impossible, but he might retaliate on anyone who had supplied information about him.

In England, Lord Halsbury, the president of the Council of the British Computer Society, writes that there is an urgent need for "file security." He advocates "an automatic right of print-out" for every person on whom computerized records are kept by agencies of government. "You cannot send people to prison because the computer says so; there has to be a better reason than that." Some records should not go on the computer at all, the Earl of Halsbury continues:

"There are, of course, certain matters which it is very proper to keep secret. The whole system of references and referees depends on security between the referee and the potential employer to whom the reference is addressed." Such secret records should be kept by the conventional

should not be computerized and easily available to all sorts of people.

"At this stage of our knowledge nothing should go on a computer unless we are prepared to grant the person to whom the computer records relate the right of print-out."

In Canada, Professor Calvin Gottlieb, of the Department of Computer Science at the University of Toronto, declares that "eventually, the only satisfactory solution will be to attach security tags to every data field and use these tags to determine under what conditions the information may be disseminated." He knows that the cost of regulating and licensing information systems would be high but advocates such regulation:

"Experience has shown that overprotection is, in fact, very rare. In my opinion, if the problems regarding protection of individual privacy are explained to the public and to those responsible for political and legislative action and the alternatives are set out, they will be willing to pay the price of keeping our social environment healthy."

Until--if ever--such protections for the privacy of data banks are established, gentle reader, you and I ought to be cautious about scribbling down information about ourselves for the use of other folk. However innocent our activities, it may be imprudent to become the defenseless subject of somebody else's computerized dossier.